

UNSPOKEN WORLDS

Women's Religious Lives

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When Christ Is a Woman: Theology and Practice in the Shaker Tradition

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On the eve of the American Revolution, Ann Lee and a small band of followers left England and set sail to establish a heavenly kingdom in the American colonies. They called themselves the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. Only a few of the original Shakers accompanied Lee; the rest remained in England with John and Jane Wardley, who had originally founded the group as an offshoot of the Society of Friends. Within 75 years of its journey west, the United Society had 5,000 fully covenanted members, and probably three times as many devotees who, for personal reasons, could not live with their Shaker brothers and sisters. The religious system of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing is

unique in human history. It proclaimed the Motherhood and Fatherhood of God, asserted that the second coming of Christ had occurred in the woman Ann Lee, fostered a social and political structure of both male and female leadership, and prohibited both marriage and private ownership of property.

By insisting that Ann Lee was the Christ and that God was both male and female, the Shakers undercut the patriarchal bias of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Christianity. Because both men and women had been created in the image of God, and because the female Christ had explicitly brought redemption for women, Shakers believed that women as well as men should have full access to all forms of religious practice and leadership.

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Living in their own version of the Kingdom of God on Earth, Shaker women and men had a rare opportunity to live in full accordance with this conviction.

ANN LEE AND THE EARLY SHAKER COMMUNITIES

Shaker sources consistently trace Shaker origins to 1747, when Jane and John Wardley formulated a group based loosely on the ideas of the Society of Friends. A group that emphasized ecstatic religious experience, they came to be known as Shakers because they both quaked and shook during their worship services. One striking feature of the Wardleys' teaching was the expectation that Christ would come soon, probably in female form. In 1758, Ann Lee and her husband Abraham Stanley were drawn to the group. At first Ann was merely a follower of the Wardleys. But eventually she would proclaim herself the second Christ and become a source of divisive controversy.

It is as difficult to uncover the life of the historical Ann Lee as it is to find the historical Jesus. Because Lee was illiterate, the reconstruction of her life, work, and ideas depends upon both the writings of those who knew her and later interpretations of the original accounts. Stories and sayings attributed to her often vary according to the prevailing theology of the time period in which they occur. Despite the difficulties in presenting her biography, several facts about Lee's life are clear. Lee was born to indigent parents in Manchester, England in 1736, five years before the Great Awakening was to sweep New England in the American colonies. Lee married Abraham Stanley in 1756. They had four children, all of whom died at birth or in early childhood. Lee and her parents had been members of the Anglican church, but in the year of their marriage, Lee and Stanley joined the Wardley community.

The loss of her children was very painful for Lee, and during the late 1760s she underwent a period of spiritual crisis. She became extremely troubled by day and unable to sleep by night; she prayed constantly for deliverance. Spiritual and physical agonies plagued her until, as her biographers claim, she perspired blood. Meanwhile, the Wardleys' small association was being persecuted by civil and church authorities for such infractions as Sabbath breaking and blasphemy. While Lee was imprisoned for Sabbath breaking in 1770, she claimed to have a revelation informing her that she herself had been chosen to be the final incarnation of Christ. When Lee was released from prison, returned to the group, and related her vision, other Shakers experienced the same revelation and hence accepted the truth of her claim. From that time on, Lee's vision became a central focus of Shaker teachings. However, in addition to her claim to be the Second Appearance of Christ, Lee claimed God had revealed to her that the root of all sin was lust, which in turn prompted all sexual relations. Thus Lee taught her followers to abandon sex and take up celibacy as a central feature of their spiritual practice. This, together with Lee's increasing prominence in the group, ultimately led to a break with the Wardleys.

In 1774, Lee had another revelation, telling her to take her gospel message to America and to create God's kingdom on earth in the colonies. Together with a small group of followers, who were mostly her relatives, Lee set sail for the Shakers' new home. The trip was difficult: a storm threatened the very lives of the Shakers; their vessel was damaged and came perilously close to sinking. Lee, however, was not daunted by the danger and, according to her companions, she controlled the forces of nature so that a wave mended the ship. This action further convinced an already devoted group that Lee shared in the power of God.

Landing in New York City, the American Shakers soon moved to a rural area in upstate

New York. Despite considerable economic difficulty, the small group of believers proselytized actively, caught the attention of many clergy in the area, and began to attract new members. However, at the same time, many of their new neighbors were eying them with considerable suspicion. For one thing, it was the eve of the American revolution and these English women and men were preaching that a new kingdom was about to be established on earth. At one point Lee was even arrested for treason. But she was released after informing the judge that God had told her he was on the colonies' side. The novel, albeit heretical, religious ideas of the Shakers were scorned by many in the surrounding community. This scorn ranged from derogatory sermons to physical persecution. Lee herself died in 1784 from injuries inflicted by an angry mob.

Lee's death precipitated a crisis for her followers. Although Lee had never claimed to be immortal, some of her followers apparently believed that Christ's Second Coming could not die. Before her death, Lee had named as her successor James Whittaker, one of the original English Shakers; Whittaker led the group until his death just three years later, in 1787. As a result of the uncertainties provoked by Lee's death, Whittaker concentrated on clarifying Shaker doctrine, and the group survived its founder's passing. An American convert, Joseph Meacham, replaced Whittaker and led the group until 1796. Prior to her death, Lee had called Meacham her "first born son in America." Under Meacham's leadership, the Shaker community organized a system of spiritual and temporal governance that has continued until the twentieth century. Lee had set a precedent for dual male and female leadership when she appointed Lucy Wright, another Americanborn member, to oversee women's affairs in the community. Meacham formalized Wright's position in the group, and she became known as Mother Lucy. After Meacham's death, Mother Lucy became the Shakers' leader. Under her tenure, the original

small group developed into a successful utopian community and began several missionary ventures westward.

The leadership that followed was never as dynamic nor as successful as that of Whittaker, Meacham, and Wright. Those three had been chosen by Lee herself; later individuals rose to leadership roles primarily because of seniority within the group. Times were especially difficult from the mid-1820s until the 1840s. Financial hardship, coupled with a conservative leadership that had never known the foundress, led to low morale and strained relationships.

During the 1840s, the community's fortunes rose again, as the result of an innovative revival called "Mother's Work." At this time, the spirits of Ann Lee and other historical or spiritual figures began appearing regularly through human "instruments," or mediums, who transmitted to the community their messages, paintings, poems, hymns, and new laws. Lasting until about 1847, this interval of dramatic spiritual activity brought renewed financial prosperity, increased membership, and missionary expansion. By the end of the 1860s, however, the Shaker communities again were in decline; individual societies were closed, members began to leave, and new converts became rare. The membership, once almost equally divided between men and women, now became predominantly female.

The decline and transformation of the Shaker communities cannot be attributed to any one factor. Ironically, financial success contributed to the decline because the group's prosperity attracted members seeking an escape from poverty rather than responding to a spiritual calling. In addition, to gain more converts, Shakers accommodated their theology to American Protestantism and hence became less distinctive. The fervent, innovative, and ecstatic worship that had once been a hallmark of the Shaker tradition now also became more restrained and traditional. Today, only a handful of practicing Shakers remain.

SHAKER TEACHINGS: ANN THE CHRIST

One striking example of increasing conservatism in Shaker teachings was a withdrawal from their initial understanding of Ann herself. The earliest Shaker communities, dating from 1770–1830, contended that Lee and Jesus were co-saviors. To support their claim that Lee had been a second savior, early Shakers reinterpreted the traditional Christian view of Christ. They saw Christ not as Jesus, but as a principle—the “Unity of Divine Male and Female.”¹ This had first appeared in Jesus and then finally, and necessarily, in Ann Lee. Christ had to come in both male and female forms, they argued, because God was both male and female. Hence they sometimes called Ann Lee their Mother in Christ because she represented the female aspect of God.

The original Shakers had described the second coming of Christ in terms parallel to those that other Christians had used to refer to the first appearance in Jesus. Hence they also called Lee “the Second Eve,” “Ann Christ,” and “Ann the Daughter.” After Lee’s death, Mother Sarah Kendall wrote that she knew Lee was

the Lord’s anointed, the Bride, the Lamb’s Wife spoken of in ancient days by holy inspiration; for she did the same work and performed miracles in the same spirit that Christ did while on earth.²

Despite the danger of making such heretical statements, Kendall affirmed the strength of her conviction by adding:

As soon would I dispute that Christ made his first appearance in the person of Jesus of Nazareth as I would that he made his second appearance in the person of Ann Lee.³

Lee’s earliest biographers tell of Lee’s powers, her ability to heal the sick, and her capacity to

search a soul merely by looking into someone’s eyes. One such account comes from Hannah Cogswell:

I know of a certainty, that Mother Ann had the gift of prophecy and the revelation of God, by which she was able to search the hearts of those who came to see her; for I have myself been an eye and ear witness of it. I have known some to come to her under a cloak of deception, thinking to conceal their sins in her presence; and I have seen her expose them by the searching power of truth, and to acknowledge that the light and revelation of God was in her.⁴

Rebecca Jackson, who founded the predominantly black community of Philadelphia Shakers, spoke of Jesus and Ann in identical terms. Jackson claimed that Jesus and Ann “lived on earth as angels do in heaven, living angel lives in earthly bodies.”⁵ Speaking of her vision of the new creation, Jackson said that both Lee and Jesus had existed before the world was made. According to Jackson, Lee had restored four spirits in one: the Mother, the Father, the Daughter, and the Son; by completing this divine quartet, Lee had saved the world.⁶ Others argued that when Jesus said “I go to prepare a place for you,” he was referring to the completion of God’s plan of salvation that had occurred through the appearance of Lee. Lee and Jesus together are the saving pair who come to redeem the world; but it is Ann, not Jesus, who completes the purpose of salvation history.

However, early Shaker writers did not simply add the concept of a female savior to Christian teachings; they rather reinterpreted the entire Bible within the context of Lee’s revelation. They used for this purpose a special approach to scripture that was common in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. According to this “typological” method of Biblical interpretation, certain figures or actions called “types” anticipate and point to the final act of salvation. But the significance of any such

"type" is not apparent until its fulfillment. Using this approach, the Shakers tried to show that all of salvation history had been moving towards completion of the Christ principle in the woman Ann Lee. When Shaker writers looked to the Bible with the idea of a female Christ in mind, they saw the women of the Bible in a new and more important light. Many Biblical women became "types" of Ann, who pointed to God's redemption of the world through her. For example, the mother of Moses became a "type" of Ann, for Ann "is the true figure of the final deliverance of the people of God though the woman."⁷ Of course, Jesus himself was also understood to be a "type." As Son of God and Anointing Spirit, he pointed to the divine Daughter, Ann.

Although early Shaker sources portrayed Lee and Jesus as equals, later Shaker theology downplayed the similarity between them. In a 1904 Shaker publication, the Shaker sisters Leila S. Taylor and Anna White claimed that Shakers had never believed that Ann was Christ.⁸ Frederick Evans, who became an elder at the end of the nineteenth century, reiterated this claim. A Shaker sister interviewed more recently, in 1974, asserted that Lee demonstrated the light of Christ that lies within every human being, but Lee herself was not the Christ. To these later writers, Lee became an exemplary prophet, a model for the true Christian. Although Lee's spiritual maturity had been without earthly parallel, she was not considered equal to Jesus. Rather than insisting on a female incarnation of Christ, later Shakers turned to the image of God as Mother to develop their concept of a female aspect of divinity.

GOD AS FATHER AND MOTHER

Whereas Shaker views of the nature of Lee changed over time, their vision of God as male and female, father and mother, remained con-

stant. Taking the first chapter of Genesis as their starting point, they contended that God's statement "Let *Us* create man in *Our* image. . . ." must be taken to mean that God was both male and female. Ridiculing the then-standard interpretation of this passage, which claimed that God was speaking to Jesus in this passage, the Shakers asked:

Was it to the Son, the Father spoke, as the divines have long taught? How then came man to be created male and female? *Father* and *Son* are not male and female; but *father* and *mother* are male and female, as likewise are *son* and *daughter*. . . .

And without this relationship there can exist no order in creation! Without a father and mother we can have no existence.⁹

In the Shakers' opinion, the truth about the motherhood of God had been suppressed by 2,000 years of Christian teaching. In order for humanity to become perfect and to live in a Heaven on Earth, both the motherhood and the fatherhood of God had to be acknowledged.

The period of Shaker history known as "Mother's Work" saw an important development in the concept of the motherhood of God. During this time a figure called Holy Mother Wisdom began to speak through the Shaker mediums; the first to receive her were a group of male and female children, but later she appeared mostly through female instruments. Holy Mother Wisdom was believed to be a manifestation of the female in God. She was not Ann Lee, but was Ann's and everyone else's Mother in Creation. According to one recorded manifestation, Wisdom had come "to set my house in order to complete and fortify the walls of my Zion."¹⁰ Eternal Wisdom stood with the Eternal Father when she proclaimed:

Bow down, obey, all ye who hear my Word, both ye who dwell on Zion, and ye who dwell in distant lands, say I Eternal Wis-

dom. . . . In word of solemn warning I sound my trumpet of wisdom unto you. . . .

Know ye that I am Wisdom, Eternal and Unchangeable Wisdom: one with God I am, and always shall be; even as he is your Eternal Father, so do I Eternal Wisdom, stand as your everlasting Mother with Him.

I sound forth mercy, with Him Judgment proclaim; We stand as one, and work but as one alone; . . .¹¹

Often, as in the above passage, Mother Wisdom is portrayed as a Warrior working to complete the creation. But at other times, Wisdom seems almost timid. Paulina Bates's long book titled *The Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom*¹² recorded revelations of Mother Wisdom in which this female aspect of God was often humble and meek and possessed many attributes considered valuable for the nineteenth-century gentlewoman. According to this view, Holy Mother Wisdom had not made herself known in the past because the world was not safe enough for her appearance. But whether her image was fierce or gentle, Mother Wisdom stood on equal footing with God and gave Shakers a complex image of God as female.

WHY WOMEN NEED A SPECIAL SAVIOR

The images of Mother God as Warrior, Gentlewoman, and Wise Woman, together with the belief in Ann Lee as completion of Christ, offered the Shakers a full reflection of woman in the deity. Furthermore, the Shaker conception of the fourfold nature of God profoundly affected Shaker attitudes towards women and Shaker social institutions. Thus, Shaker theology offered to women a means by which many Shaker sisters could become freer than

women who were their contemporaries in United States society.

According to the Shaker view, women were equal to men in their original nature because the two genders had been created in the likeness of a God who was both male and female. Nevertheless, Shakers agreed with mainstream Christianity of the time on two important points of biblical interpretation. First, they agreed that men and women had sinned through Adam and Eve and hence had lost the possibilities of this original condition. Second, the Shakers, along with most Christian interpreters, agreed that women had then become subordinated to men because Eve had brought about humanity's fall. Unlike most other Christian interpreters, however, the Shakers claimed that female subordination was not final. Because the Millenium had arrived through the coming of Ann Lee, male domination had been overcome, and the true equality of men and women could be restored.

Moreover, Shaker writers asserted that women could be redeemed *only* through a female savior. An early Shaker theological compendium noted:

It was therefore indispensably necessary, for the final restoration of man to eternal life, that the spirit should be revealed *in that sex where sin first began*; and there destroy that enchanting influence which the woman received from the serpent, that alluring power by which the natural man is led, and through which the fall of man was first produced. [Emphasis added.]¹³

Note this text's presupposition that sin "first began" with the female sex. The writer assumes that women are even more vulnerable to evil than males. He goes on to say that women therefore had to be raised from "the lowest state of the fall" in order to be "made a fit temple for the Holy Spirit to dwell in." Thus, the Shakers' very positive view of women's potentialities was based on an initially negative assessment.

Until the Second Coming of Christ, women and men had not shared a similar capacity for perfection. Instead, since the fall women and men had had a completely different moral makeup. The female nature was most evident in the character of the first woman, Eve. Like most Christian interpreters of the day, Shaker theology located the origin of the world's evil in Eve's inclination towards what they called "animal sensations." While Adam was somewhat responsible for his own actions, Eve was plainly responsible for the downfall of both human ancestors. Instead of rejecting Eve's role, as one might expect, Shaker writers never questioned this notion. Instead they tried to show why it had been necessary for evil to enter the world through a woman. The Shakers argued that since all humanity had entered the world through women, evil must have arisen out of the same source. Eve's communication with the devil had excited her "animal sensations," and lust, which gave rise to sin, had thus been born. Through the interaction of Adam and Eve, the male had also fallen prey to these sensations. Adam and Eve participated "in the act of sexual coition; and thus partook of the forbidden fruit."¹⁴

Before the Second Coming, women had been weak, and hence were easily led astray. Like all creatures, Eve had the ability to refuse temptation; but she instead gave in to her fleshly nature. Because of this, the animal nature became humanity's reigning principle. Only by intervention of God's Spirit could humanity be restored to its true spiritual nature. Jesus, a male, had brought redemption for men. However, women required a different plan of salvation, because women's moral quality differed from that of men. Before Ann Lee, women had no savior. Thus, in the Shaker view, men had gained access to perfection almost two thousand years before women had done so. Clearly, the sin of the female was grave, for it took two separate

appearances of Christ to eradicate women's sinful tendencies. But women had finally been redeemed, and a new, egalitarian "Heaven on Earth" had now become possible.

WOMEN IN GOD'S KINGDOM ON EARTH

Perhaps the most exciting aspect of Shaker practice was the fact that Shakers actually tried to design and live in such an egalitarian "Heaven." From the time of their beginnings in New York, the Shakers were millenarians; they believed that they were living representatives of the Kingdom of God on earth. Their pattern of daily life could therefore not be ordered by the laws and customs of the fallen, secular, imperfect world. Their own rules of governance and day-to-day activity had to mirror the ways of heaven. To live in the way that they felt the redeemed ought to live, the Shakers founded alternative communities. Situated mostly in rural areas that at the time of founding were part of the American frontier, these communities owned their own land, designed and built their own buildings, and produced most of their own food, clothing, furniture, and even machinery. Being self-sufficient and unobtrusive, they were usually left alone by the new U.S. government and by their neighbors. Hence they were also able to shape their own social and political life-style. Three central components of this life-style held important implications for Shaker women: celibacy, communal property, and the Shaker form of community organization and governance.

From the time of Lee's vision to the present, a central Shaker practice has been celibacy—that is to say, total abstinence from sex and marriage. Like other Shaker teachings, Shaker justifications for celibacy changed during the course of Shaker history.

Lee herself set the tone for the early Shaker abhorrence of sexual intercourse when she stated:

Those who choose to live after the flesh, can do so; but I know, by the revelation of God, that those who live in the gratification of their lusts will suffer in proportion as they have violated the law of God in nature.¹⁵

Early Shaker sources, following Lee's own teachings, generally charged that sexual relations are the primary cause of sin in the world. Later sources were less likely to stress the evils of sexuality itself. But they still viewed celibacy as an important way to protect the unity of the millennial community. Sexuality leads to marriage, and married persons tend to look to their spouses' and children's needs rather than committing themselves fully to their spiritual families. Most Shaker defences of the celibate life furthermore emphasized that marriage places women in a subordinate role.¹⁶

The Shaker practice of celibacy is often misunderstood. Although Shakers preferred a celibate lifestyle and required celibacy before a person could take up residence in one of the Shakers' own settlements, not all Shakers lived within the celibate communities. Non-celibate Shakers, sometimes called "householders," often remained with their worldly families. In all probability, most of these "householders" were women. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century laws invariably granted custody of children to a father if one of the parents left the household. A woman who joined a celibate Shaker community without her husband would lose all claim to her children and be unable to see them. In contrast, a man who left his wife to join would take his children along with him. Mary Dyer, a woman of the early nineteenth century who published scathing attacks on the United Society, published her exposé, *A Portrait of Shakerism*, as

part of her efforts to win custody of her children from her Shaker husband.¹⁷

Moreover, Shakers at times questioned their own celibate practice. Near the close of the nineteenth century, when their population was dwindling, some Shakers even for a time considered starting a "generative order"; this would be for those who found celibacy too difficult a cross to bear. However, other members disputed this idea, and the noncelibate order was never founded.

In contrast, Shakers never challenged their second major departure from mainstream American practice—the abolition of private ownership. The Shaker belief that members should hold all lands and goods in common was based on Lee's revelation that "Christianity did not admit to private property." This practice was closely linked to the celibate ideal, for *any* interest in the material world was considered to be an expression of lust. All carnality—all desire for worldly things—had to be eradicated in the New Kingdom. This included both the desire for sexual union and the desire for material wealth.

The practice of sharing property was already on record in 1782; in that year, Benjamin Barnes gave all of his land to the settlement which survives today as Sabbathday Lake. From these early beginnings it swiftly became the norm for all fully covenanted members to donate all their property to the community. By the 1820s, Lucy Wright was asserting that the Union was the Gift. That is to say, Union, the united effort of the believers, depended on the sharing of Shaker resources. Shakers argued that private ownership was a barrier to spiritual and temporal equality. Property served to divide rather than unite a community. It led to the subjection of women, to slavery, and even to war.

In fact, the ability to give up property, rather than the practice of celibacy, was the ultimate test of commitment to Shaker teachings. A person living at a Shaker settlement could lead a

celibate life and still not be considered fully in Union. Union was reserved for those who signed the Covenant, a document that transferred permanent ownership of the signer's property to the community. Shakers did not do this immediately upon joining; in 1799, Mother Lucy Wright created a "Gathering Order"—a kind of novitiate—that lived exactly like other Shakers and practiced celibacy. But these new members retained their right to retrieve their property if they decided to leave the community. In contrast, if fully covenanted members left, their property remained with the Shaker community. Because Shaker property was jointly held, it was considered to be wholly devoted to God. It could not be used to benefit individual members, even in cases where members retained some right to reclaim it. The Shakers adamantly upheld this position even from the time of the first written covenant.

The Shaker practice of sharing property, like the practice of celibacy, had important implications for Shaker women; for both tended to equalize the relationship between men and women. Nineteenth-century thinkers were well aware of the close correlation between private ownership and the subjection of women. At the time when Shaker communities were enjoying their largest membership and prosperity, Friedrich Engels was writing his *Origins of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. Monogamous marriage, Engels contended, was a means of extending property and insuring its transference to male heirs. This kind of relationship was "the first form of the family to be based, not on natural but on economic conditions, on the victory of private property over primitive natural communal property."¹⁸ Engels argued that the male's ownership of property and consequent economic superiority over the female led to male supremacy in the marriage relationship. Therefore the marriage relationship was not mutual. Instead, in his view, "the modern individual family is founded on the open or concealed domestic slavery of the woman."¹⁹

Comments remarkably similar to those of Engels on the inequality of the marriage relationship and women's dependent status appear frequently in the writings of Shaker sisters. For example, Paulina Bates commented on the status of the married woman:

Hence ariseth the belief in many that the female is not in possession of a living soul; but [is] merely a machine for the use and benefit of man in his terrestrial state of existence.²⁰

Yet another woman echoed Engels's own words when she wrote, in 1882: "Woman's condition is little superior to slave."²¹

Both Engels and the Shaker writers of course presupposed the economic structure of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century marriage. In America of that time, as in Engels's Europe, ownership of property was allotted almost exclusively to men. American women were subjected to the principle of coverture, which the United States had taken over from English common law. In marriage, according to this legal standard, "the husband and wife were one person—the husband."²² Because of coverture, married women had no rights of ownership; during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries women could hold property only if they were single or widowed. The Married Women's Laws, passed during the 1860s, altered this principle slightly, but they protected only the property that a woman brought to her marriage. Anything acquired by the woman during the marriage was still owned by her husband. Hence within a typical family structure, women became totally dependent upon men; for men controlled their means of financial support. When a woman married she ran the risk of becoming yet another possession, because she had no financial autonomy. And yet for most women of the time, marriage was the only viable option for women; they had no other means of making a living.

Both Shaker celibacy and the Shaker system of community property undercut this sys-

tem at its foundation. Shaker men did not hold property; nor could they use community property for their own benefit; therefore they could not use it to exercise power over women. Women had equal access to the Shaker community property; therefore they were no longer economically dependent on men. Shaker celibacy meant that men and women did not marry; even if a Shaker couple had been previously married, they did not live together, and their marriage was not recognized by the community. Hence even the habit of wives submitting to their husbands could not carry over into the redeemed community.

But perhaps even more importantly, by doing away with households founded on marriage and individual ownership, the Shakers gained an opportunity to create a whole new style of human society. People in the Shaker community were joined by faith, not by marriage or blood relationships. They lived in Spiritual Families as children of Heavenly Parents. "Families," or living groups of from 30 to 100 men and women, made up a "Community." They were designated by location—for example, they were called "South Family" or "North Family." Several "Communities" were in turn gathered into a "Bishopric"; and the "Bishoprics," in turn, comprised the United Society.

Moreover, at each organization level, the Shakers had multiple leaders. They separated "spiritual" from "temporal" office. The Lead Ministry, consisting of Elders and Eldresses, provided spiritual leadership; Deacons, Deaconesses, and Trustees directed temporal matters. Spiritual leadership was patterned after the heavenly rule of the Father/Son and Mother/Daughter; therefore two men and two women directed spiritual affairs in each administrative unit. The four Shakers in the Lead Ministry were referred to as "Mother" and "Father." They headed the United Society from New Lebanon, New York. Each Bishopric was directed by a "Ministry," consisting, again, of two men and two women. Two

Elders and two Eldresses led each "Family." Deacons and Deaconesses, as temporal leaders, did not govern, but rather supervised particular tasks. There were, for example, Farm Deacons and Kitchen Deaconesses. Trustees were in charge of financial matters and controlled the Shaker communal property.

Because this complex governmental structure required leaders at each level, women had much greater access to leadership roles than they did in the greater American society. About one in fifty Shaker sisters would fill a leadership position during her life in the United Society.²³ Moreover, the woman leaders were no mere figureheads; especially those in the Lead Ministry held considerable responsibility. Lucy Wright, the most important Eldress in Shaker history, made final decisions concerning construction of new buildings, missionary expansion, and publications. Wright's opinion prevailed even when her views were controversial. Although later Eldresses were somewhat less visible than Wright, they travelled on missionary ventures, visited the Western societies, and directed spiritual matters. Even in cases where male leaders seemed more prominent than the women, the women still held more power than non-Shaker counterparts.

Lesser ministerial roles of men and women within the community were similar. Confession of sins was a requirement for union. Women heard women's confessions; men were confessors to men. In addition, women taught and produced spiritual sayings that were passed down and revered for generations. Work roles had male and female supervisors; Deaconesses supervised women's work; deacons supervised the work of men.

Still the Shakers made some discrimination between the tasks of men and the tasks of women. Early records indicate that Mary Witcher was a trustee in 1792,²⁴ but by 1800 women no longer functioned in this capacity. Although Shaker records do not indicate a reason for this change, women trustees would

clearly have endangered the community because of existing U.S. property laws. Any Shaker property held in the name of a female would have been subject to these laws. Although married couples lived separately after joining the communities, the states continued to recognize their marriages. If the former husband of a trustee had left the community, he could have claimed all of her property, including any that the United Society held in her name.

Moreover, with few exceptions, the daily tasks of men and women were assigned along conventional gender lines: women worked within the Shaker kitchens and dormitories, while men worked in the fields and outbuildings. Despite these stereotypical roles, the Shaker division of labor held different implications from the standard practice of the nation. For one thing, in the Shaker community, women's work was not considered to be of lesser value than the work of men. All work was equally sacred because it contributed to God's new creation on earth. Furthermore, the women's work was economically vital to the community. Shakers were farmers; the crops they produced had to be processed and preserved so that the community could use them. Food preservation was especially important; preservation kept food through the winter, and sale of surpluses brought income for necessities. Finally, Shaker work was communal; women worked by the side of other women. This meant that women's "inside" tasks never isolated Shaker women as they isolated other American women within their nuclear homes.

One striking final distinction between Shaker male and female activity is harder to account for or justify. Despite the Shakers' commitment to the sharing of spiritual power, men almost totally dominated the development of Shaker theology. With only one exception,²⁵ the Brothers edited and authored all theological works until the end of the nineteenth century. On the other hand, during the

era of "Mother's Work," women were the primary "instruments," the mediums, through whom Holy Mother Wisdom and other spirits spoke. Hence the Shakers seem to have maintained the frequent human division between men as scholars and thinkers and women as vehicles for religious experience. This distinction has no basis in Shaker theology. Moreover, it did correspond to a difference in power. Those who produced the approved theological writings were senior males of the society; and their writing itself was powerful because it told Shakers and others what Shakers thought about themselves. The mediums in "Mother's Work," however, were often people with little seniority; and because they served as instruments only, their roles brought them virtually no power in the group.²⁶ Ironically, however, the products of these women who channeled "Mother's Work" are now the best-known aspect of Shaker creativity. Most Americans now know Shakers, if at all, primarily through the mediums' spirit drawings, poetry, and hymns.

CONCLUSION

The Shaker vision of Christianity brought to women a degree of equality and control of their lives that is unparalleled elsewhere in Christian history. Responding to an image of God as male and female, a belief in separate but full redemption for men and women, and a conviction that God's Kingdom could be established on earth, the Shakers founded a society in which men and women shared in power and spiritual authority. Although they failed to solve all of the problems created by gender distinctions, they nonetheless provide us today with a vision of what a truly egalitarian society might be like. Their solution was quite radical: doing away with property, sexuality, and marriage is a sacrifice that few contemporary men or women would be will-

ing to make. Nonetheless, their effort still inspires us, while their view of God as female Savior, Wisdom, Warrior, and Mother offers a positive, empowering vision of all that women can be.

Notes

1. Benjamin Youngs, *Christ's Second Appearing* (n.p.: The United Society, 1808), p. 12.
2. Mother Sarah Kendall, quoted in Roxalana Grosvenor, ed., *Sayings*, p. 9, as quoted in Robley Whitson, ed., *The Shakers: Two Centuries of Spiritual Reflection* (New York: Paulist Press, 1983).
3. *Ibid.*
4. Hannah Cogswell, quoted in Seth Wells, ed., *Testimonies Concerning the Character and Ministry of Mother Ann Lee* (Albany, N.Y.: Packard and Van Benthuysen, 1827), p. 31.
5. Jean McMohan Humez, *Gifts of Power: the Writings of Rebecca Jackson, Black Visionary, Shaker Eldress* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1981), p. 287.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
7. Youngs, *Christ's Second Appearing*, p. 52.
8. *Shakerism, Its Meaning and Message* (Columbus, Ohio: Fred J. Heer, 1904).
9. Youngs, *Christ's Second Appearing*, pp. 503-4.
10. Philemon Stewart, *A Holy, Sacred and Divine Roll and Book*, vol. 2 (Canterbury, N.H.: The United Society, 1843), p. 262.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Canterbury, N.H.: The United Society, 1849.
13. Calvin Green, *A Summary View of the Millennial Church* (Albany, N.Y.: Packard and Van Benthuysen, 1823), p. 230.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
15. Whitson, *The Shakers*, p. 163; quoting Daniel Mosely who is quoting Ann Lee.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 158. Contrary to popular opinion, celibacy was not the reason for the Shakers' decline. In fact, the practice of celibacy probably contributed to the Shaker community's success in comparison with other utopian communities,

which could not handle the economic or ideological stress of having to raise and indoctrinate a second generation.

17. (Concord, N.H.: For the Author, 1822).
18. Alice Rossi, ed., *The Feminist Papers: From Adams to de Beauvoir* (New York: Bantam Books, 1974), p. 142, quoting Engels, n.p.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 480.
20. Paulina Bates, *The Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom* (Canterbury, N.H.: The United Society, 1849), p. 505.
21. Ruth Webster, *The Shaker Manifesto*, XII, no. 4 (1882), p. 82.
22. Norma Beach, *In the Eyes of the Law* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 17.
23. Marjorie Procter-Smith, *Women in Shaker Community and Worship* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Edwin Mellen Press, 1985).
24. *The Shaker Quarterly*, III, no. 4 (Winter 1963): p. 92.
25. Bates, *Divine Book of Holy and Eternal Wisdom*.
26. See Priscilla Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986), Chapter 7.

Further Readings

- Brewer, Priscilla J. *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives*. Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986.
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